

****Disclaimer:** The specific descriptions, goals, desired conditions, and objectives only apply to the National Forest System Lands within the Bald Mountains Geographic Area. However, nearby communities and surrounding lands are considered and used as context. ******

Bald Mountains Geographic Area

Updated: May 19, 2017

Description of area

High elevation grassy balds add a striking diversity to the Bald Mountains Geographic Area, which is shaped by the Roan Mountain Massif, Iron Mountain Ridge, and the Unaka and Bald Mountains. The balds on these long, mostly parallel ridges are primarily treeless and provide spectacular long-range views.

The 20-mile stretch of mountain-top balds along the Roan-Unaka Mountain Range known as the Roan Highlands contains a mix of species unique on the Forests. A prominent tourist destination since the 19th century, the Roan Highlands remain one of the most visited sites in the region. One of the most distinct features of the landscape is the internationally-known Roan Mountain Rhododendron Garden, occurring at over 6,000 feet.

The steep sideslopes of the undulating peaks along the state border have many drainages that feed into steep, cold streams. These streams flow to small rivers, and into the Nolichucky, French Broad, Pigeon, and Elk Rivers. The Nolichucky River significantly influences the landscape as it cuts a deep gorge separating Flattop Mountain to the south and the Unaka Mountains to the north. The region's forests include northern hardwoods and spruce-fir at higher elevations and abundant rich cove forests in the southern portion of the geographic area. Max Patch, a high-elevation opening in the Harmon Den area bisected by the Appalachian Trail, is popular with visitors.

The 118,693 acres of Forest Service-managed land in the geographic area (348,086 total acres) lie within the Appalachian Ranger District serving five counties: Mitchell, Madison, Haywood, Yancey, and Avery. Local population centers, such as Hot Springs, Burnsville, Wolf Laurel, Bakersville, and Roan Mountain, rely on the lands in the geographic area for a wide range of benefits.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Appalachian National Scenic Trail corridor
- National Historic Trail Corridor (Overmountain Victory Trail)
- Inventoried roadless areas
- Big Laurel Creek scenic/botanical area, Paint Rock geological/botanical area, Big Bald Mountain geological/botanical area, and Roan Mountain botanical/zoological area
- Big Laurel Creek, French Broad River, and Nolichucky River portions of which are eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers

Connecting people to the land

The Bald Mountains and neighboring geographic areas were the historic homeland of the Cherokee, including the Lost Cove agricultural community remnants dating from 1850s to the mid-20th century, and

the Paint Rock petroglyph. Rich Mountain Lookout, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps is a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP)-eligible historic property.

More than half of the Forest Service land in the geographic area is in a roaded natural setting with developed recreation opportunities. Visitors to this area have a higher possibility of interacting with other visitors and Forest Service staff, especially at popular sites such as Roan Mountain, Max Patch, Elk River Falls, or Murray Branch Picnic Area. Developed boat launches and a fishing pier are popular for cold water fishing.

The geographic area's many unique recreation opportunities also attracts visitors seeking solitude or adventure. Visitors enjoy long-distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail and Mountains-to-Sea Trail, horseback riding, mountain biking, and remote whitewater rafting/kayaking. The lower French Broad River is one of the most visited river destinations in western North Carolina, and flows through the Pisgah National Forest before entering Tennessee. The elevation drop of the Nolichucky River brings boaters to the forest for remote whitewater experiences on class IV rapids. The Bald Mountains provide numerous opportunities to hunt white-tailed deer, black bear, small game, and upland game birds. The area also provides a unique opportunity to view elk in the area in and around Max Patch.

Agriculture, health care, education, manufacturing, wood products, and tourism are all major economic drivers for the local communities. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation in support of tourism, and commercial gathering of forest products such as Galax, Fraser fir cones or seedlings, and medicinal herbs all contribute to the local economy. Additionally, Walters Dam creates Waterville Lake, which provides hydropower and whitewater recreation opportunities to adjacent mountain communities.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

The unique topography, geology, and hydrology of the region sets the stage for specific restoration goals determined by the current forest composition and wildlife habitat needs. The ecological conditions in the northeast portion of this area are very different from the southern portion. The northeast portion of the area supports spruce-fir and northern hardwood ecosystems, which could be enhanced to provide high quality habitat for golden-winged warblers and the endangered Carolina northern flying squirrel. Shortleaf pine and dry-mesic oak communities surrounding Hot Springs present an opportunity to restore the forest to a more resilient composition and structure in the face of forest pressures from exotic species and changing climate. In the southern portion of the geographic area, dominated by rich cove and mesic oak forest, opportunity exists to restore young forest and oak woodlands to increase habitat for animals such as elk and ruffed grouse.

Across the geographic area overall, there is not enough young forest, and there is an overabundance of closed of mid through late seral stages. In old growth, the high elevation red oak, dry oak, and pine ecozones are more closed than desired. This geographic area contains the highest quality grassy and alder balds in western North Carolina and have more native vegetation than any other geographic area. These habitats are being encroached by woody vegetation. Other rare communities in the region include boulderfields and high elevation rocky summits to the north, basic and montane cliffs, and shale slope woodlands in the mid to south regions. High elevation rocky summits provide habitat for four federally listed plant species, Roan bluet, Blue Ridge goldenrod, spreading avens, and rock gnome lichen. The habitat and the associated species are under pressure from climate change.

Clean and abundant water

The geographic area provides water to the municipal water supply at Cascade Branch. Approximately 1,200 miles of streams and rivers flow through the geographic area on National Forest System lands, supporting numerous populations of native brook trout. The lower French Broad River supports the highest aquatic diversity in western North Carolina, including many rare fish, amphibians, and reptiles.

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Goals

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Restore and maintain open conditions across mesic oak, pine-oak heath, shortleaf pine and dry mesic oak ecozones in the Hot Springs Area and where this geographic area connects to the Cherokee National Forest. Management approaches will focus on restoring appropriate distribution of age classes, and improving forest health and resiliency in the face of climate change and other pressures while reducing off-site species and improving habitat conditions for species preferring open forest conditions such as golden-winged warbler, ruffed grouse, and elk.
- b) Increase and maintain grassy balds and other open habitats at high elevations between Roan Mountain and Max Patch. Management approaches will focus on improving habitat for open area-associated species such as golden-winged warbler, ruffed grouse, elk, and rare plant communities.
- c) Extending west from the Harmon Den area, emphasize oak habitat and species diversity, enhancement of habitat for elk, ruffed grouse, and golden-winged warblers.
- d) Maintain and restore native populations of ginseng. Manage permitted collection of American ginseng at sustainable levels.

Providing clean and abundance water

- a) Within the Pigeon River watershed, enhance brook trout populations by improving aquatic organism passage or population augmentation where habitat is suitable.

Connecting people to the land

- a) Emphasize equestrian trail opportunities in Cold Springs, Harmon Den, and Shinbone.
- b) Respond to increased demand for access particularly in response to growing public interest in mountain biking experiences in the Hot Springs area.
- c) Emphasize visitor safety at high used recreation sites, including waterfalls such as Elk River Falls.

Places to be managed in consideration of their unique features

Roan Mountain – *Plan direction will be contained in a separate Management Area.*

- a) Maintain and restore high quality alder balds and high elevation rocky summits on Roan Mountain.
- b) On Roan Mountain and surrounding areas, regenerate and restore Fraser fir and red spruce.

Appalachian Trail – *Plan direction will be contained in a separate Management Area.*

Overmountain Victory Trail – *Plan direction will be contained in a separate Management Area.*

Opportunities to partner with others

- a) Partner with Cherokee Tribes to preserve traditional and ceremonial areas and restore high elevation balds to enhance traditional special uses.
- b) Partner with the Cherokee National Forest on managing along the North Carolina-Tennessee state line.
- c) Preserve Rich Mountain Fire Tower through partnerships with communities, non-government organizations, and interested members of the public.
- d) Continue cooperation with neighboring landowners, including the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, National Park Service, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and Rocky Mountain Elk foundation to enhance and restore elk habitat in southwest portions of the geographic area.
- e) Partner with trails associations and the National Park Service to preserve and interpret the Overmountain Victory Trail.

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